

More than 60 dead in New Year's Eve fire in Bangkok

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Up to a 1,000 people were packed into the Santika nightclub in Bangkok on New Year's Eve when a fire broke out. Flames raced through the entire building, reducing it to a burnt-out shell in just two hours. So intense was the heat that the roof of the concrete building collapsed.

At the latest count, 62 people are dead after a woman succumbed to her injuries on Saturday. More than 220 were injured in blaze and over 100 are still in hospital, including 32 who are in intensive care fighting for their lives. The vast majority of the victims were Thai locals, but some 35 foreigners were among the dead and injured.

While the exact cause of the inferno is unknown, the reason for the high number of casualties is all too clear. The building was a fire trap, which lacked adequate prevention and safety measures, including sufficient emergency exits. Some of the windows were barred and doors locked. Many of the victims were trampled in the panic to escape.

A witness, Sompong Tritaweelap, told the media: "People were screaming for help from every window. It was a terrible sight. Their hair and clothes were on fire but there was nothing they could do as the fire engulfed them... I saw people, particularly young girls, being pushed away and crushed underneath as others were stomping on them trying to get out."

Another witness said he saw corpses charred beyond recognition inside and people fleeing with burns over 90 percent of their bodies. "Bodies, some of them probably alive, were falling off the stretchers as the rescue workers rushed them away."

Up to 19 bodies remain unclaimed in the police morgue, burnt beyond recognition. The police said DNA analysis would be required for definite identification. Police Lieutenant Colonel Prawit Kantwol said: "Most of the victims died from suffocation, but some were also killed in a stampede when people were trying to get out."

The fire spread quickly because of the building materials used. Some witnesses said the blaze engulfed the building after a fireworks show ignited foam-like inflammable material intended to soundproof the ceiling. Video footage showed people waving sparklers in the club just before the fire. Other witnesses denied that fireworks caused the fire and pointed to a possible electrical fault.

Once the fire started there were no means for containing it. The club had no sprinkler system and reportedly just one fire extinguisher on the three floors. Of three possible exits, only the front entrance was known to patrons. There was no signage to indicate other emergency exits. Staff escaped through an unmarked back entrance, while a third door had been locked to prevent the theft of alcohol.

Alex Wargacki from Britain tried to use the third emergency exit but found it had been welded shut. He suffered burns on his face and hands and smoke inhalation. Doctors have been trying to extract carbon from his lungs. Wargacki told the *Times* that he was lucky to be getting hospital treatment. "Some people I know went home. Some of the Thais are just lying in bed," he said.

Wargacki told the BBC: "I had been to the club many times. I guess I always knew the place was a bit of a death trap. But that's like so many places here. That's Thailand. You come to expect it. I have worked here for four years

and got used to it. Even some shopping malls are accidents waiting to happen."

The Santika nightclub was licensed only as a food shop and was supposed to close at midnight. It had no permit to function as an entertainment venue. The police had expressed concerns about the suitability and safety of the building, but the club had continued to operate as an appeal process initiated in 2003 dragged on in the courts. With plans to move to a new location, the club promoted its New Year's party as the "goodbye Santika bad boy party".

The nightclub was one of the city's best known. The surrounding area is affluent and the club's clientele mainly middle class. The fact that the Santika club could operate without a licence was not unusual. Corruption is rife in Thailand and nightclubs and bars often have to pay various bribes and protection money to the police, army officers, politicians or organised criminals.

Poor regulations and the lack of enforcement make such tragedies inevitable. On New Year's Day, a fire broke out in a bar on Soi Cowboy, an area of Bangkok known for its bars and prostitutes. Last Sunday, one person died and at least 38 others were injured in a blaze at Sua Pa Plaza, a shopping and residential complex in Bangkok's Chinatown district. More than 100 people were trapped by the Sua Pa Plaza fire; 15 had to be lifted to safety by helicopter after they fled to the roof.

The lack of elementary safety measures extends to workplaces. On May 10 1993, 188 workers were killed in the worst factory fire in history at the Kader Industrial toy factory on the outskirts of Bangkok. Hundreds of workers were packed into the three buildings that collapsed. There were no fire extinguishers, no alarms and no sprinkler systems. The elevated walkways between the buildings were either locked or used as storage areas. The buildings were constructed from un-insulated steel girders that gave way in less than 15 minutes.

In the wake of the Santika nightclub fire, Thai authorities have initiated an investigation. However, the scope of the inquiry will be narrowly confined to identifying the cause and finding a scapegoat to pin the blame on. No effort will be made to address the broader lack of regulation and enforcement that allows businesses to operate in fire traps.

Lieutenant Colonel Prawit Kangwol told the media on Friday that the deputy national police chief chaired a meeting to lay out guidelines for identifying the cause of the fire. "The assumptions are a short circuit or small fireworks that triggered the fire inside the club," he said. Police expect the investigation to take up to two weeks.

Thai officials summoned the 13 directors of the Santika club, and police met on Sunday with the major shareholder Visuk Setsawat. An investigating officer, Colonel Kajornsak Pansakorn told Agence France Presse that Visuk would be charged with carelessness resulting in death and admitting under-age people to the club. One of the dead was a 17-year-old school student.

In comments to the media, Interior Minister Chavarat Charnvirakul spoke in general terms of the need to strengthen lax law enforcement of building codes. But he suggested that the fire was an isolated case resulting from individual negligence. "An accident like this can happen everywhere and in every country," the minister said. "But I really don't want this to happen because it came from carelessness."

While individual businessmen may cut corners on safety to boost their profits, their ability to do so flows from the lax policies of successive governments. Neither the interior minister nor the government as a whole has any intention of enforcing the type of safety standards needed to prevent another tragedy. To do so would mean, in Bangkok alone, the closure of thousands of business premises, shopping centres and factories that fail to meet basic requirements.



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